



Our Mission. Your Safety. Your Mobility. Your Economic Opportunity.

Idaho Transportation Department

Today's News Briefs

Source: Idaho County Free Press
(Grangeville)

Author: David Rauzi

10/29/2004

Questions remain following 2003 plane crash

GANGEVILLE â€“ It's been more than a year since a small commuter plane crashed in the rugged plains east of White Bird, an incident that left the pilot dead and initiated a joint investigation with United States and Canadian law enforcement agencies over the aircraft's apparent illegal cargo.

Cause of the crash is being stated as pilot error, according to a National Transportation and Safety Board (NTSB) report, but questions still remain. As regards any alleged illegal activity, as it is an open investigation, little follow-up information is available on the case which has resulted in no arrests -- either in the U.S. or Canada -- and still no official revelation as to what the aircraft may have been hauling.

"This is still an active case for us," said Sergeant Charles Spencer, Idaho State Police Investigations.

Due to the ongoing investigation, he could not discuss the nature of the cargo nor confirm or deny whether it was of an illegal nature.

The investigation revolves around the July 17, 2003, crash of a Canadian-registered Piper Seneca II twin-engine aircraft on Camp Howard Ridge in the Joseph Plains area approximately five nautical miles southwest of White Bird. Killed in the crash was the pilot and sole occupant, John F. Duthie, 52, of Calgary. Wreckage was extended over an area of approximately 550 feet.

Information released immediately following the crash by the Idaho County Sheriff's Office, the aircraft allegedly contained high quantities of unspecified "illegal drugs".

According to a NTSB report issued April 28, probable cause of the crash was "failure of the pilot to maintain clearance with terrain while maneuvering," with contributing factors being "impairment of the pilot due to carbon monoxide exposure and the trees."

In a post-accident toxicology test, Duthie was found to have a carboxyhemoglobin (carbon monoxide) level of 17 percent, which the report stated "would be expected to result in measurable impairment of cognitive function." Ephedrine (a stimulant found in asthma and allergy medicine, for example) was also found in his blood and liver.

Carbon monoxide (CO) is produced from burning organic matter, such as from cigarettes, vehicle exhaust and fires. On this 17 percent figure, for comparison, healthy urban nonsmokers may have CO levels up to 2 percent and smokers up to 7 percent. Toxic symptoms arise at 20 percent with progression to convulsions, coma and death at 60 percent.

As to the CO levels within Duthie's system, the cause is "undetermined," according to Tom Little, air safety investigator with the NTSB Northwest Regional Office in Seattle.

"We checked through the airplane, and we couldn't find anything," Little said. The most likely source, the cabin heater, was examined but no leaks were found, and no definitive evidence was found that Duthie was a smoker. Of the ephedrine detected, levels were negligible and not believed to be at debilitating levels.

According to Spencer, one of the reasons this remains an open case is the mystery of Duthie's flight route which placed him in an area that didn't agree with his stated destination.

The NTSB report stated Duthie's flight departed from the Springbank Airport in Calgary at an undetermined time. No flight plan was filed but it was told to maintenance personnel to be Vancouver, British Columbia, a trip he had made several times.

According to a medical certificate issued a month prior to the crash, Duthie indicated he had 10,200 hours of total flight time, of which 310 were with the Piper involved in the accident.

"We had been under the impression he was supposed to be flying to Vancouver," Spencer said, information that was not entirely consistent with what witnesses were telling investigators. Even people close to Duthie had different ideas of where he was going, he added.

The morning of the crash, two Idaho County witnesses reported -- one at 7:55 a.m., the second at approximately 8:45 a.m. -- seeing a twin-engine airplane flying low and parallel to the Salmon River. One report was of a north-northwest bound airplane headed toward the mountains at an altitude between 200 to 500 feet.

At 8:45 a.m. the Idaho Aeronautics Department reported receiving an Emergency Locator Transmitter (ELT) signal, and 9:30 a.m. the aircraft wreckage was located.

In the year since the crash, ISP has been conducting the investigation in cooperation with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Calgary Police Department. Information is flowing between agencies, but due to different sets of operating rules and regulations, "it just makes it a bit more time consuming," Spencer said.

While parts of the case are pretty evident to investigators, "parts are still a mystery to us," Spencer said. "We're trying to find out what happened."